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ABSTRACT

This digest identifies several common types of nontraditional families and presents a few of their characteristics relevant to their children's education. It also offers some recommendations to help schools provide support for the families to ensure their inclusion in all aspects of schooling. Multiracial families comprise both children whose parents have different ethnic heritages and those who themselves are of different ethnicity from their parents. Educators can promote the positive development of multiracial students by treating each child according to his or her unique characteristics. Educators who teach children from families with gay or lesbian parents should respect family views about disclosure and be sensitive to problems children may have resulting from family secrecy. A growing number of children live in families with grandparents or other relatives. Educators must be alert to the special needs of these children. Their needs, like those of all students, are best met when schools support high standards for all and affirm students' feelings. Both schoolwide and classroom strategies can be used to help students from nontraditional families feel a sense of belonging and receive acceptance and support from peers and teachers. An executive summary of this report is contained in a separate document that has been included in this same accession. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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FAMILY DIVERSITY IN URBAN SCHOOLS

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FAMILY DIVERSITY IN URBAN SCHOOLS

From 30 to 60 per cent of students in urban schools live with caregivers other than their biological parents (Hampton, Rak, & Mumford, 1997). Although these children usually have a nurturing home life, they seek reassurance that they are the same as their peers with more traditional families. The parents of some of these children, such as multiracial and gay and lesbian couples, require only acceptance and full inclusion in school activities. The families of others, such as foster parents and grandparent guardians, need more services because their children suffer from the effects of traumatic early life experiences.

This digest identifies several common types of nontraditional families, and presents a few of their characteristics relevant to their children's education. It also offers some recommendations to help schools provide support for the families to ensure their inclusion in all aspects of schooling.

Types of Urban Families

While some social critics assert that the institution of the family is crumbling, in fact, new types of families are emerging as social service agencies strive to provide children with supportive homes and as individuals previously discouraged by society from becoming parents now do so. Therefore, using traditional criteria to define families may leave many children feeling unlike others. A recommended alternative definition of family is that it is "any group of individuals that forms a household based on respect, the meeting of basic needs, as well as those of love and affection, and one in which assistance is freely given to maintain social, spiritual, psychological, and physical health" (Bozett, cited in Limoge & Dickin, 1992, p. 46). In urban areas, school are likely to include the following types of families:

Multiracial Families

This family group comprises both children whose parents have different ethnic heritages and those who themselves are different ethnically from their parents. The development of a multiracial identity of such children, which extends through adolescence, is mediated by parental attitudes about personal classification and ethnicity in general. Society's attitudes, particularly racist attitudes, toward multiracial individuals also influence the identity of these children (Okun, 1996; Wardle, 1987).

Educators can promote the positive development of multiracial students by treating each child according to his or her unique characteristics instead of lumping together children of various ethnicities as generically multiracial. They can also learn and honor how the family wants the children to be identified: classifications range from "human" and "multiracial" to "monoracial," which indicates that the family has selected to designate only a single heritage for their children (Miller & Rotheram-Borus, 1994).

Families with Gay or Lesbian Parents

Children who live with gay or lesbian parents may be either adopted or the biological offspring of one parent. They have no more socioemotional problems and are no more likely to be homosexual than children raised by heterosexuals. However, some may suffer from the emotional consequences of a bitter legal custody battle that denigrated their gay parent, or be victimized by homophobic peer ridicule. Children in middle childhood are more likely to treat their home life matter-of-factly, while adolescents may be more critical of their home life (Rubin, 1995).

To respect family decisions about disclosure, teachers should refrain from publicly asking children very specific questions about their home life, and help the children of "closeted" parents deal with any logistical or emotional problems that result from the need for family secrecy (Rubin, 1995).

Inservice training can help teachers deal with any personal negative views about homosexuality by explaining why acknowledging a student's home life does not necessarily imply agreement with it (Wickens, 1993).

Foster Families

Some foster children have developed crucial survival skills and exhibit minimal behavior and adjustment problems. Others, perhaps the majority, demonstrate the effects of past neglect and abuse, grief over separation from their biological family, and the trauma of frequent placement changes. Repeated school transfers force foster children to adjust to different learning environments. And they may not have developed learning skills, may never have received educational supports at home, and may be more concerned about meeting their survival needs than their educational needs (Ayasse, 1995).

Because some foster families include several children of different ages, and parents' attention may be divided, schools need to design responsive programs to involve parents. New parents may need help in creating a home environment conducive to learning, and, particularly, doing homework (Stahl, 1990).

To help foster children feel welcome in the new school, administrators need a specific plan for enrolling and integrating them, possibly on short notice. Foster children respond especially well to praise, but many perform below grade level. They need educational supports that not only increase their skills but also their self-esteem and commitment to school; therefore, retention and special education classes may further alienate them from school (Stahl, 1990). To ensure that foster children receive necessary medical treatment and psychotherapy, schools can arrange for them to visit on-site or community clinics and counselors (Cormier, 1994).

Families with Grandparents and Relatives as Parents

A growing segment of foster parents consists of grandparents or other relatives of children. Frequently, they must assume responsibility for children with little notice and while they are all in the throes of grief. Grandparents may be concerned about having too little energy for parenting again, but they nevertheless usually thrive in their role and mitigate the negative consequences for children of moving into a new home situation (Okun, 1996).

Children residing with relatives need most of the same services from schools and social service agencies as do other foster children. Since grandparents can benefit especially from programs that free them temporarily from caregiving responsibilities, it would be helpful for schools to collect and provide information about after-school, weekend, and summer activities for children.

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School Strategies for Family Inclusiveness

To promote the positive development of all students, and especially those with nontraditional families, it is crucial for schools to establish high universal performance standards, celebrate family diversity, and extend equal respect and support to all members of the school community. Schools also need to affirm students' feelings, take their concerns seriously, and enforce regulations against hate bullying, especially when students perceived as different are targeted (Carter, 1993). Some specific ways schools can support students from nontraditional families are discussed below.

Schoolwide

Schools can help staff focus on the stability and quality of a student's home environment rather than on its composition by providing inservice training that includes the following information (Limoge & Dickin, 1992; Wardle, 1987):

- The great variety of lifestyles that promote children's ability to achieve academically, and develop into personally satisfied and productive adults.
- Ways to identify, understand, and overcome personal feelings of bias.
- Legal issues related to family composition, including custody, consent, confidentiality, and the rights of non-custodial and non-related caregivers.
- Ways to respond effectively and sensitively to student misbehavior.
- The characteristics of individual students and their families, as the information relates to their education and to behavior and communication with their family.

Schools can also employ the following strategies for promoting acceptance of diverse families (Limoge & Dickin, 1992; Okun, 1996; Wardle, 1987):

- Provide library and classroom resources that reflect family diversity.
- Select and use inclusive terms for caregivers in all family communications.
- Use student and school contact forms that allow families to identify themselves in the way that they choose and to report all the information they believe is important.
- Give families the opportunity to provide relevant information, such as the way interracial children want to be identified; to express concerns; and to review the school's handling of diversity issues.
- Develop a curriculum strand to increase student knowledge of the various types of families that exist both in their school and in general, and invite family input.

Curriculum and Classroom Activities

As children learn, particularly through reading, they "develop paradigms of what is good and bad, correct and incorrect" (Hampton et al., 1997, p. 11). Therefore, reading engaging stories about different types of families and successful individuals with nontraditional families develops literacy skills, encourages appreciation of diversity in all children, and validates the homelife of individual children. Books can also be therapeutic as they help children relate their own problems to those of the characters. Teachers can further promote students' appreciation of family diversity in the following ways (Carter, 1993; Limoge & Dickin, 1992; Wardle, 1987):

- Identify, or invite for a presentation, role models from nontraditional families and a variety of cultures.
- Provide examples of several types of families, identifying the unique strengths of each, and encourage students to talk about their own families (if they feel comfortable doing so).
- Use language that indicates acceptance of family diversity, such as "co-parent," "caregiver," "person you live with," as well as "mother" or "father."

Conclusion

Whereas some children growing up in nontraditional families have reference groups comprised of relatives or friends, others may not and feel isolated, marginalized, and even rejected by society (Rubin, 1995). Therefore, to be fully inclusive, schools need to maintain an environment where all children and families feel a sense of belonging, acceptance, and support from peers and school personnel. Further, all children need to be treated equitably (Rubin, 1995). Schools must "focus on the health of families instead of passing judgment on their composition" (Limoge & Dickin, 1992 p. 47).

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